

Sola Scriptura

Romans 1:16-17

On October 31, 1517 Martin Luther nailed his 95 Theses to the door of the Castle Church in Wittenberg, Germany. While this event is viewed as the catalyst for the Protestant Reformation, a “pre-reformation” had been taking place for at least 400 years prior.

Who was Martin Luther?

[The following brief bio of Luther is excerpted from Nate Pickowicz, *Why We’re Protestant: An Introduction to the Five Solas of the Reformation*, 2017]

Martin Luther was born in Eisleben, Germany on November 10, 1483 to Hans and Margaret Luther. Although his family were peasants, his father worked very hard to provide Martin with a chance to earn a good education. Hans Luther wanted better for Martin than a life in the coal mines, so he sent him away to school to become a lawyer. He would graduate from the University of Erfurt in 1505 with bachelor’s and master’s degrees.

On July 2, 1505, only a few months after graduation, Martin was returning home from Erfurt when he was caught in a terrible thunderstorm. Growing up with a mother who was deeply devout and superstitious, he was prone to see every event of life as having spiritual significance. For him, the thunderstorm was nothing less than God’s unleashing of judgment on his soul. Suddenly, a bolt of lightning pierced the clouds and knocked him to the ground. In sheer terror, Martin cried out to the patron saint of miners, “Help me, Saint Anne, and I will become a monk!”

Of the seven monasteries in Erfurt, Luther chose one of the more strict—the Augustinian order. **He had hoped that his devotion to monastic life would ensure a life of peace, as he was constantly fearful of God’s judgment.** And, certainly, God couldn’t be displeased with a monk! Martin was determined to keep the requirements of monastic life to the letter. Recalling his days in the monastery, Luther would later write, “If any monk ever got to heaven by monkery, then I should have made it.”

He was obsessive, unrelenting, and legalistic about his regimen. His slavish devotion to prayers, fasting, sleeping without blankets, punishing himself, etc., nearly cost him his life. He writes, *I tortured myself... and I inflicted upon myself such pain as I would never inflict again, even if I could... if it had lasted much longer, I would have killed myself with vigils, praying, reading, and the other labors.*

But why such extreme behavior? Why the torturous regimen? Why the devotion to utter self-destruction? One word: sin. Luther couldn’t escape the reality of his own condition. Having previously been a law student, his mind was trained on the tiniest details of the law; and as a monk, he could not escape the exacting nature of God’s holy

law. And it plagued him. “Oh, my sins! My sins! My sins!” he would cry—hysterical over them, and laboring tirelessly to confess each and every one. It was not uncommon for Luther to spend several hours each day in the confessional, bearing his soul to his fellow monks. Luther couldn’t rid himself of his guilt and shame over even the most minute sin.

In an attempt to alleviate Martin from his downward spiral, his mentor, Staupitz, suggested to him that a trip to the Eternal City would do his soul some good. And so, in 1510, Luther made a pilgrimage to Rome. He arrived full of hope, but his hopes were dashed, as the holy city proved to be a hellish city. To his disgust and disillusionment, Luther observed the very worst from the Roman clergy. The priests were arrogant, flippant, licentious, and irreverent; many of whom were practicing the most wicked behavior fit only for pagans. Aghast, Luther wrote, “No one can imagine the knavery, the horrible sinfulness and debauchery that are rampant in Rome.”

Upon his return home, Luther was no more encouraged than before he left; in fact, he had sunk even deeper into his depression. The very things that were supposed to bring a Catholic believer hope and peace were bringing him further into the depths of despair.

Unsure of what else to do, Staupitz announced that Luther was being sent to the University of Wittenberg to become a teacher, which would help get his mind off his spiritual ailments. And so, in 1511, Martin Luther traveled to Wittenberg, Germany, where he would spend the rest of his life.

The Discovery of the Doctrine of Justification

Upon arrival at the Augustinian monastery in Wittenberg, Luther began to work on his doctorate in theology, which he earned in 1512. Soon after being appointed to the faculty at the University, he began to teach the Bible—first the Psalms (1513-1515), then Romans (1515-1516), Galatians (1516-1517), and Hebrews (1517). These studies would constitute a paradigm shift in Luther’s thinking, and through his studies, he came to the knowledge of saving faith in Jesus Christ.

While it’s hard to nail down his date of conversion, we do get a glimpse of Luther’s thought process, as he came to understand the gospel. Previously, Luther had only ever understood God to be an angry, vengeful God—a terrifying image of Christ wielding a sword of divine judgment. This view of the Lord plagued him. But while teaching Psalm 22, Luther encountered another side of Christ—that of a suffering servant, abandoned by His Father, crying out, “My God, My God, why have you forsaken Me?” This image was only intensified when Luther contemplated Christ in the Garden of Gethsemane, sweating drops of blood in anguish. And then to see the Savior, nailed to the cross, suffering the punishment of God, his understanding began to change. Luther was seeing a Christ who bore sin and judgment on Himself, dying for him. “The contemplation of

the cross had convinced Luther that God is neither malicious nor capricious," writes Roland Bainton, "But there still remains the problem of the justice of God."

When he arrived upon the text of Paul's letter to the Romans, he found himself transfixed on the phrase: "the righteousness of God" (Rom. 1: 17). In fact, Luther obsessed over it. He longed for understanding.

He writes, "My situation was that, although an impeccable monk, I stood before God as a sinner troubled in conscience, and I had no confidence that my merit would assuage him. Therefore I did not love a just and angry God, but rather hated and murmured against him. Yet I clung to the dear Paul and had a great yearning to know what he meant."

Luther wrestled night and day, agonizing over the text, until he saw the connection between "the righteousness of God" in Romans 1: 17 and Paul's quotation of Habakkuk 2: 4 just a few words later—" the just will live by faith."

The blinders started to come off. The weight was being lifted. Luther recounts:

At last, by the mercy of God, meditating day and night, I gave heed to the context of the words, namely, "In it the righteousness of God is revealed, as it is written, 'He who through faith is righteous shall live.'" There I began to understand [that] the righteousness of God is that by which the righteous lives by a gift of God, namely by faith. And this is the meaning: the righteousness of God is revealed by the gospel, namely, the passive righteousness with which [the] merciful God justifies us by faith, as it is written, "He who through faith is righteous shall live." Here I felt that I was altogether born again and had entered paradise itself through open gates. Here a totally other face of the entire Scripture showed itself to me.

Whereas Luther, along with the whole of Christendom, had believed that a person *had to become righteous* through sheer will power: in truth, *righteousness is granted as a gift by God to those who have faith in Jesus Christ.*

How is a sinner made right with a holy God? The Protestant Reformers reply, "We are saved by **grace alone** through **faith alone** in **Christ alone** according to the **Scriptures alone** for the **glory of God alone.**"

The Reformers believed that the place to discover the answer to their question ("How can a sinner be made right with a holy God?") is found in Scripture alone.

The Canon ("Measuring Rod") of Scripture: the 66 books of the Bible were accepted based on their acceptance by the Apostles. Neither Jesus or the apostles ever quote from the Apocryphal books.

Apostolic Tradition

Alongside the testimony of the Scriptures was also the unwritten apostolic witness of tradition, i.e., “the tradition of the apostles.” The word “tradition” is *paradosis* in Greek – “what is handed down.” They sometimes use this word to include both Scripture and the idea that there were practices of the apostles which had been handed down in the church through custom. By the fourth century it is more and more common to refer to these unwritten customs of the apostles as tradition: liturgy, small practices that could arise within liturgy (ie, crossing yourself, rituals, bowing when entering a church building, the order of the worship service and what is included in a worship service), aspects of church government. Tradition is viewed as having equal authority with the Bible.

The Character of Scripture

1. It is Inspired by God: 2 Timothy 3:16-17
2. It is Inerrant: the Scriptures are true in all that they claim, and are without error
3. It is Authoritative: only the revealed commands of God in Scripture are binding on the believer, not the so-called infallible teaching office of the church known as the Magisterium: the Pope and the bishops.
4. It is Sufficient: nothing needs to be added to it. It is important to note that the declaration of the Reformers was Scripture ALONE, and not Scripture ONLY. God has used the creeds and councils of the church to bring clarity to doctrine – but Scripture ALONE is the foundation of all that we believe and practice.

We have a perfect, God-breathed Bible which contains everything we need for life and godliness. What are we doing with it?